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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: OCTOBER 2013

AVOID BEING DESPISED AND HATED

There's nothing more terrifying than walking down the street.

I like audiobooks. A few years ago I got a free copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and I began to listen to it at night. I would fall asleep listening to it. The first couple of nights were a slog, and frankly, if the reader's voice hadn't been so attractive I probably wouldn't have stuck with it.

Then something strange began to happen. I'd catch myself thinking like Machiavelli. Sometimes I was unaware that I had been influenced by the text until the next evening, when I re-listened to the chapter from the night before and found that the part I'd slept through matched my thinking during the day. I'd express myself in unfamiliar terms too, like "concerning X, …." or "that one should…". I had to stop listening because Machiavelli (or at least his translator) was undoing my efforts to write clearly.

All that was a while ago, but Chapter XIX, *That One Should Avoid Being Despised and Hated*, still sticks with me. Why? There's something very common-sense about it. When I first heard Chapter XIX , I didn't fall asleep. I jumped out of bed to write down this fragment from the fourth paragraph:

> *… a prince ought to have two fears, one from within, on account of his subjects, the other from without, on account of external powers.*

This fragment came back to me a few days ago, when Dianne Feinstein made an abrupt about-face on the whole spying issue. Feinstein feels spying on heads of state is a problem, but spying on her own constituency isn't.

Now, of course, Sen. Feinstein is the spokesperson for a group of people in a democracy, so there are very few parallels between her and the princes Machiavelli wrote about.

But it occurs to me that Sen. Feinstein values spying on her constituents more than spying on her counterparts in other countries. She's happy to make concessions to Angela Merkel, but not to John Doe. The greasy hag knows which way her bread is buttered.

I believe most people are used to thinking of foreign powers as adversaries, but it comes as a rude awakening to realize that their own leaders view them as the enemy.

It shouldn't surprise people, though. Feinstein is a rich woman, fattened by a dying kleptocracy. Of course she fears the people she's mislead and stolen from– that fear is quite natural. Why wouldn't she use every tool at her disposal to watch political opponents, journalists… anyone who could lead a charge that might strip her of her goodies. Whereas Merkel and Feinstein probably have something in common; they can more easily come to a mutually beneficial understanding.

Since the American leadership are 'ethically challenged', and have not figured out how to avoid being despised and hated, they have to spend a lot of time and energy out-conspiring those who *might* plot against them.

LEAVE A COMMENT

UNCLE! UNCLE!

Hanging out with Jacob?

Well, we've come full circle. Laura Poitras, Glenn Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill are teaming up with eBay founder Pierre Omidyar to start their own news media outlet.

Cards on the table: Pierre Omidyar is a technology billionaire who runs in the same circles as Microsoft founder Bill Gates and his chess partner Warren Buffet. Omidyar's non-profits fund projects like "Ushahidi", from Pierre's bio at achievement.org (no laughing!):

> *Among other Omidyar family philanthropies, the Omidyar Network supports the creators of the emergency communication technology Ushahidi (Swahili for "testimony"), an application which allows users to create maps from data submitted by cell phone users… Crowdmap, a free user-friendly web-based version of the application is now available online, thanks to the support of the Omidyar Network.*

"Ushadhidi" reminds me of the program Morgan Freeman's character threatened to quit Wayne Enterprises over in *The Dark Knight*.

Pierre, God says it's unethical.

The information above ought to be enough to blow this new media venture's credibility out of the water. But it gets better.

Pierre recently teamed up with Arianna Huffington to make HuffPost Hawaii, check out their totally chummy pics here. I was in D.C. when the HuffPo mother-ship was launched: Craig's List was heavy with Arianna's ads searching for journalists to staff her outfit. This gave rise to to innumerable "gently used" journalism jokes, because well, there were a lot of out-of-work journalists in town and why would Huffington want to shake up the fourth estate?

So thanks to Pierre, HuffPo's disappointing journalism now has a Pacific outlet. A lot of funky stuff seems to go down in Hawaii. Sort of like D.C.'s home away from home.

Yes, I believe that whatever Omidyar's media venture is, it's not a spontaneous gift to truth in journalism. Why have somebody like Pierre Omidyar be the face of the money?

Well, let's see. He's ethnically Iranian, but his parents enjoyed a privileged life in Paris. Pierre was born in 1967 and the family moved to Potomac when he was a boy– gee, that would be sometime around the Iranian Revolution. Potomac is a tony D.C. suburb, favored by people who get rich off the federal government. Pierre went to good schools nearby and started working for Apple Computer.

Then, magically, he founded eBay and could quit his day job. There were a few strange detours along the way, as documented by Jennifer Viegas in *Pierre Omidyar: The Founder of Ebay*:

> *The http://www.ebay.com site also linked to a page on the Ebola virus. Called Ebola Information, the page had all sorts of links and information pertaining to the deadly disease. It is unclear why Omidyar created the page. Regardless, there is an apparent similarity between the words "Ebola" and "eBay".*

Er, yeah Jennifer. Or maybe it has something to do with his eventual 'charitable' interest in ~~AFRICOM~~ Africa.

And then there's the little PayPal thing:

> *In 2002, eBay acquired the online payment processing firm PayPal, which it uses to process most of its online transactions, compelling many online sellers to employ the service.*

In 2011 Paypal refused to handle donations to Wikileaks. Why? PayPal froze Wikileaks' assets after it released stolen US diplomatic cables.

Step back a minute here, Laura. I would have thought that *at least you* were smarter than this. Better find something Pierre said BACK THEN to distance himself from the Paypal decision, PRONTO.

Does it make any sense for me to go on, or have I made my point about Greenwald's/Poitras'/Scahill's latest move?

Just one more. Jeremy Scahill, famous from *Democracy Now!*, was outside Slobodan Milosevic's house the night the Serbian leader was arrested. Wow! Any journalist with prescience like that must be… smart

and hard working!

Hear the gospel, Whistle-blowers: now you can find Laura at her own media venue! Come one come all! One stop shopping! (Pun intended.)

The Russians just have to be in here somewhere… but, in the meantime, my sides hurt from laughing! It makes me want to shout…

Photo thanks to Jim Griffith. My opinions are mine alone.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE CHINESE CENTURY

Yunjie Temple, Qing Dynasty

Yunjie Temple, at the dawn of the “Chinese Century”

Last week a sad news story came out of China: a centuries-old temple painting had been ‘restored’ to look like a cheap movie set. In case you missed it, I’ve posted before and after shots above. The temple is located in Chaoyang, Liaoning.

Some media outlets immediately drew comparisons to the equally sad desecration of a church in Borja, Spain by a demented octogenarian. This is a stupid comparison, because there’s no reason to believe anyone involved in the Chinese affair was mentally incompetent. What’s even worse, is that this type of tragedy is not rare in China. In fact, historically sensitive restorations are the exception rather than the rule.

Greed and stupidity– the type of greed and stupidity that would allow a Starbucks inside the Forbidden City– share a portion of the blame when historical sites are degraded. However, there is a more insidious problem contributing to the destruction, one that is particularly tragic for the Chinese people. The problem is that they don’t know their own history.

What!? A country as rich in history as China and its people are uneducated about their past!? Yes. And it’s worse than uneducated. On the whole, they are totally ignorant. The reason? To have a historically-literate population is dangerous to the government in Beijing; it’s easier to blame social problems on things the population doesn’t understand, like the old empire or foreigners.

Here are a couple of fun examples.

One day in Beijing I was sitting on a bus bench, reading a book on Empress Cixi. I had two separate elderly people chastise me for reading a book with an evil lady on the cover.

My first language class in China started with the teacher excoriating me for the British introducing opium to China, because before the “foreign devils” arrived, nobody in China had a drug problem.

Any historian who is interested in China dies a little whenever they encounter these attitudes, which are not uncommon. This ignorance is compounded by the fact that the Cultural Revolution destroyed so many of the physical reminders of Chinese history: the temples, artistically important secular buildings and traditional rituals. China may be a country rich in history, but its people are completely detached from that wealth. This detachment results in travesties like the Yunjie Fresco Restoration.

One more anecdote. I had a friend from southern China who now lives in the USA. His great-grandparents had participated in The Long March, they were rewarded with important government positions in his home province, and the current generation held lucrative posts in that province’s Import/Export bureau. The point is he wasn’t from an impoverished background.

We were leafing through an IKEA catalog one day before class. There was a double-spread of a very Zen-looking living room. He said:

"Before I came to the States I didn't know what Chinese looked like."

I thought he was making a joke, because while the living-room set was clearly a Japanese-Scandinavian fusion design, the Ikea designers had covered everything with red and traditional Chinese characters. I thought my friend was commenting on the cultural confusion in the design. So I chuckled at the 'joke'.

"No really," he said, "I didn't know what Chinese looked like before I went to the museum here. There isn't much of that left in China. Everything is concrete blocks and, like, communism."

To put my friend's situation in perspective, imagine an American kid who has never seen a neoclassical building. Or a Brit who has never been exposed to half-timber architecture. At least the Russians kept something of the past around, even if only as a cautionary tale. Most Chinese have nothing left. Their towns and cities are crumbling concrete bunkers, which may be what the American experience is heading toward, as post-war apartment blocks and suburbs reach the end of their useful lives.

There are other similarities between where China is at and where the US is going. In China, history is not considered an important or prestigious subject to study. (The brightest students are channeled into medicine or engineering, there's little personal choice involved.) The important 'social science' is politics class, where the students learn tracts of official propaganda by heart. If these are imperfectly regurgitated during the final exam, it affects the student's ability to join the party and the quality of job he can get.

In some US cities (like New York City) history has been completely dropped from the school curriculum. Parents tell me the reason is that too many competing interests bickered over how the material was presented, so the public schools decided to drop the subject altogether. Instead, the students are taught the right way to think about various social issues, which change as the political potency of these social issues changes. A student's future success depends on how thoroughly he can incorporate these values into his beliefs.

How many years before we get this?

2 COMMENTS

REVELATION FATIGUE II

When Snowden first alerted everyone to the NSA's privacy abuses and collaboration with US companies, I didn't pay much attention to the journalists doing the leaking. I assumed there was an element of opportunism; my opinion of journalists is not high. There's lots I missed.

For instance, Peter Maass' article on Poitras in the NYT: *How Laura Poitras Helped Snowden Spill His Secrets*. It made my morning. (All quotes are taken from it.)

I guess that Snowden flailed around for about a month contacting journalists, like Glenn Greenwald, trying to draw attention to (probably) the most wide-spread government abuses of our time. Glenn couldn't wrap his head around the encryption software, so he ignored Snowden. Laura had to pull Glenn's attention back to Snowden weeks later, after she was contacted out of the blue.

> *Poitras was not Snowden's first choice as the person to whom he wanted to leak thousands of N.S.A. documents. In fact, a month before contacting her, he reached out to Greenwald, who had written extensively and critically about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the erosion of civil liberties in the wake of 9/11. Snowden anonymously sent him an e-mail saying he had documents he wanted to share, and followed that up with a step-by-step guide on how to encrypt communications, which Greenwald ignored. Snowden then sent a link to an encryption video, also to no avail.*

Who else did Snowden contact during that month? Honey-traps? 'Cause, if I was running a honey-trap to catch NSA whistle-blowers, I'd make sure she was on all the NSA watch lists, but I would never actually shut her down. *Cough, cough.*

Is it possible that the NSA/CIA/GCHQ could have got an inkling that something was up during those 30-odd days? I mean, they're watching influential people who criticize them, aren't they? And we found out recently that the creator of Snowden's encrypted email provider, Lavabit's Ladar Levison, was willing to cooperate with the FBI as long as they covered his costs in doing so. Could there have been a similar weakness earlier on, during the month Snowden was cold-calling dissident journalists with limited IT knowledge? Maybe somebody nasty got a whiff that there was a contractor with a conscience at the NSA. Call in the clean-up crew!

Which brings me an insightful comment by Greenwald:

> *"I keep calling her [Poitras] the Keyser Soze of the story,*

> *because she's at once completely invisible and yet ubiquitous," Greenwald said, referring to the character in "The Usual Suspects" played by Kevin Spacey, a mastermind masquerading as a nobody. "She's been at the center of all of this, and yet no one knows anything about her."*
>
> *"It's really annoying and complicated, the encryption software," Greenwald said as we sat on his porch during a tropical drizzle. "He kept harassing me, but at some point he just got frustrated, so he went to Laura."*

Ouch! Glenn, you kinda do national security for a living. What makes Glenn useful also makes him dangerous. "Keyser Soze" describes Poitras' weird relationship with Jacob Appelbaum just as pertinently.

There's something off about Greenwald. (10 dogs– really?! How do ya find the time, Glenn?) Poitras' caginess is equally weird. Would a psychologist please explain this to me:

> *She [Poitras] showed no emotion and did not mention that she had been in the middle of an encrypted chat with Snowden. At the time, I didn't press her, but a few days later, after I returned to New York and she returned to Berlin, I asked if that's what she was doing that evening. She confirmed it, but said she didn't want to talk about it at the time, because the more she talks about her interactions with Snowden, the more removed she feels from them.*
>
> *"It's an incredible emotional experience," she said, "to be contacted by a complete stranger saying that he was going to risk his life to expose things the public should know. He was putting his life on the line and trusting me with that burden. My experience and relationship to that is something that I want to retain an emotional relation to." Her connection to him and the material, she said, is what will guide her work. "I am sympathetic to what he sees as the horror of the world [and] what he imagines could come. I want to communicate that with as much resonance as possible. If I were to sit and do endless cable interviews — all those things alienate me from what I need to stay connected to. It's not just a scoop. It's someone's life."*

Poitras carries a deep sense of responsibility toward her source, yet she bounces Snowden off a Navy man like Jacob Appelbaum?

Peter Maass' article appeared in the NYT, one of the papers Snowden rightfully lambasted as being a tool of the state. However, Poitras and Greenwald invite Maass into their den– even while Poitras is online with Snowden. Clearly Poitras trusts the NYT more than her source does. I don't see any meaningful information in Maass' article that couldn't have been given via email. What Maass does include about Greenwald's home does more damage to the pair's image than good.

How does Maass end this article? By taking a page out of Bush II's playbook. Remember *Fahrenheit 9/11*? Remember when Moore got hot and bothered about Bush playing golf while telling Americans: your lives are in danger but don't forget to go shopping? I remembered that clip when I read page nine and discovered Glenn's worried he'll pork out and Poitras wants to get back to her yoga. Seems like all the way back in August somebody wanted to suggest that, maybe, this Orwellian-NSA thing was being blown out of proportion, maybe all that's needed are better outlets for the NSA's talents, or better management… don't forget your diet or yoga mat! What's Big Brother to a trim figure?

The sad thing is that I think Glenn does a good job when he talks about things like protecting the rights of journalists and the NSA abusing private citizens. I really enjoy watching him ream shills and bought journos. BUT, Glenn, if you read this, ask yourself why *you* are the one talking about the USA spying on other governments and government-aligned companies as though there's something unusual about that. (I dare say that Brazil, France and Mexico spy on the US the same way, as far as they are technically able.) BECAUSE, Glenn, you're now distracting from the big story, which is what motivated Snowden to give you the break of your life, the break which you weren't smart enough (or just too lazy) to recognize at first. The break Laura lead you to, and is letting you bury under an avalanche of "who cares?".

You're not helping when you talk about things other than the big picture: NSA/GCHQ/Partner Spooks using private companies to abuse their own citizens. That's the big one, Glenn. Don't be the guy who undermines what Snowden achieved.

LEAVE A COMMENT

REVELATION FATIGUE

As addictive as cocaine.

I used to be highly-motivated to succeed, and by 'succeed' I mean the traditional American interpretation of success: having money. I started my own business when I was 13. No joke. You see, I identified a niche market: after-hours candy sales at my boarding school. We called junk-food 'tuck' and 'tuck' was only sold by the matrons (the ladies in charge of the dormitories) from 7-7:30 pm. Demand for tuck exceeded supply.

Being an American, I was also able to get a monopoly on the supply of certain goods, like Oreos, which were not yet widely available in Britain. I loaded my suitcase with cheap Wal-Mart bought goodies and by three weeks into term, I'd made a couple hundred dollars profit. I knew that there was no rule against what I was doing. I also knew that, for some reason, the matrons wanted to control tuck sales. *Better to beg forgiveness.*

And then the inevitable happened. One of the other girls in my year didn't like the idea that I was selling tuck after hours, so she told me that she was going to report me to the headmistress. Why she told me before she tattled I'll never know, probably a power-trip, but she gave me a half hour notice. What to do?

Go to the headmistress myself first, of course. So that's what I did. There was no rule against what I was doing, but the head asked me to stop and I complied. She didn't make me give back the money though, and when the rat showed up at the head's office a while later, she left deflated. And she avoided me for some time.

What's the point of this story? If you know something unpleasant is going to come out about you, it pays to prime the audience in your favor. Even better if that unpleasant information can be FIRST leaked by someone you trust to give it the best possible spin.

What if there are a series of ugly truths about to come out? Let's say, for example, that instead of just selling junk food, I'd branched out into Body Arts, plying my services with one of those DIY home-piercing-guns. A sort of a.nolen-vice-multinational.

The most damaging thing to rat me out on would be the body piercing, obviously. If the rat waited until one of my customers developed an infection, then she might even have gotten me expelled– she'd never have to see my profiteering mug again! *Buhahahaha!*

And let's say that the rat went straight to the headmistress this time, no B-movie pause for villainous gloating. *a.nolen's piercing the other girls for profit! Little Alice's belly ring is really swollen!*

Well, in that case, the powers that be would have to convene to decide my punishment. This would probably be done at a meeting, after which, if I did nothing, I would be expelled.

But what if I appeared at the meeting and made this startling revelation: "The rat is a twerp," I would say, "but I also sold Oreos."

What a bombshell! No, not really. Though the school board may have to convene one more meeting, next week, to decide if separate punishment was needed for the unauthorized tuck sales. I would also appear at that second meeting, breaking the news that Twizzlers were involved too. Another meeting! We'd work our way downwards: Twinkies, Sno-Balls, Wrigley's Gum… I could talk lots and lots and lots…

I might even get a friend to write a letter informing the school board that cigarette sales were involved. This would be a lie that I could debunk in due time.

As you can imagine, after the gum and false start on underage tobacco sales, the board might be tired of hearing of my lesser crimes, and Alice's infection would have healed… "So maybe," thinks the school board, "the whole thing was blown out of proportion after all". Maybe all that a.nolen needs is a more constructive outlet for her 'talents'. Better *management*.

Hell, if I was really organized, I might even set up some insurance policies against getting caught. I could go to the economics teacher and say something like: "Daddy wants to give GBP 10k to your department, what do you think of my entrepreneur idea?" Then, if need be, I could get the economics teacher to testify at the board meeting that there was scholastic merit in my endeavor.

Or, I could have paid another student to befriend the rat and feed the rat the story about cigarettes. Then, if the rat DOES rat me out, I'll be able to debunk the cigarette story in front of the school board and discredit the rat!

There are all sorts of things I could do to distract everybody from the fact that I was doing home-piercings for profit on school property, provided I had money or some other useful incentives.

Now imagine the following and re-read this post:

"home-piercings" = "spying on innocent people thru US firms"

"Oreos, Twizzlers, Sno-Balls" = "spying on France, Mexico, Brazil"

"headmistress" = "general public"

"a.nolen" = "NSA *et alia*"

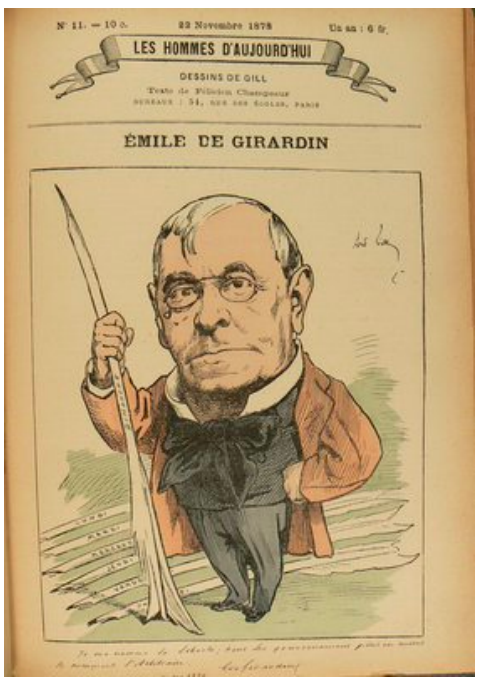
"rat" = "Snowden"

"bought friends" = "~~loudmouth tool~~ Greenwald, ~~military intelligence~~ Appelbaum, ~~CIA~~ Poitras, ~~does he even know~~ Assange"

It would be super-cool if I could put the rat in cold storage while the school board convened, ~~Putin~~. And I sure as hell would try to stop the rat from taking Bill Binney's advice and not releasing any more information.

LEAVE A COMMENT

READ ALL ABOUT IT: EMILE DE GIRARDIN



I've been collecting a flock of neglected newspapermen over the past several months. I haven't sought them out, but stumbled onto their stories while looking into other things. They are men that the general public needs to know more about.

So, here's a brief introduction to Émile de Girardin, who I first encountered while reading about the history of croissants.

Émile de Girardin was the bastard son of a Parisian general. Bastard sons are particularly dangerous for the ruling class, because while they have some access to power, they also have reason to feel cheated and alienated.

Girardin seems to typify the bastard son. He was made an inspector of fine arts just before the revolution in 1830, then went on to develop a series of newspapers, all incendiary to varying degrees. His big media break came under the (loose) patronage of the Duchesse du Berry, who wanted to promote herself as a fashion icon through her own newspaper, *La Mode*.

Readers can take the name 'La Mode' at face value, because it really was a fashion rag– sort of like *Vogue*, which would be a perfect analogy IF the personalities surrounding *Vogue* were an *intentional* parody of the regime in Washington. And therein lies the rub, because the Duchesse may have rocked the boat a little too hard when she enlisted Girardin to build her reputation at the expense of other, more conservative, court members. His jibes at the court were so provocative that the Duchesse had to withdraw her support of the paper– but it kept publishing.

Girardin had very flexible political views: from monarchist (lite) through socialist (lite) at different times. The unifying thread is that, whatever the political stance of his papers, they all furthered his prestige.

Girardin's success is probably due to excellent promotion and financial backing; but his newspapers are *famously* successful for being cheap and written in short paragraphs. Short paragraphs are a still big deal today: most news media is written to a 12-year-old reading level, as I've talked about here.

For the first time Parisians had something cheap'n'easy to read every morning. (The croissants would come shortly after.) As a result, Girardin became rich and influential.

In our time of globalization, it's interesting to note that Girardin's most famous paper, *La Presse*, was started as an advocate of free trade. He opened *La Presse* in a period of social upheaval: financiers were challenging the power of France's old-guard aristocracy (what was left). Girardin's attack on the Monarchy used fashion and finance to preach to the reading public.

What were educated people saying about Girardin? Here's one quote, in reference to the quality of writing in his newspapers:

> *"It reminds one of the method of mincing food for babies or the infirm. An argument reduced to these proportions has been found digestible for the weakest minds; and when it is sold at a penny, it is in like manner within the resources of the slenderest purses. M. de Girardin has vulgarized political discussion in the least offensive sense." (Edmund Hodgson Yates from* Celebrities at Home*, 1879)*

Girardin's baby-food strategy won him so much political power, that King Louis Philippe abdicated in 1848 at the newspaperman's urging. The French got a president-for-life instead.

I find it creepy that today's political/cultural landscape bears Girardin's hallmark so strongly, as though the zeitgeist's stuck on 'rage of the bastard child'. Are angry children, who just want to grab what they can and run, going to head our institutions for another hundred and fifty years? Or can we collectively find a way of keeping our leaders responsible?

Girardin's media empire became the model for my next newspaper magnate, the Croissant King, August Zang, and his *even more* open contempt for the general public.

LEAVE A COMMENT

PHAGE THERAPY

"Boo!"

When I was in grade school it was fashionable for teachers to introduce impossibly heavy topics to under-tens, ostensibly to improve our chances of becoming good 'world citizens'. No one questioned the wisdom of dumping nearly-intractable problems onto children who had no means of doing anything about them, but like so many social campaigns, our parents were probably the real target. I particularly remember this topic: 'antibiotic-resistant bacteria'.

Speaking for myself, most of these looming catastrophes went in one ear and out the other, but a few hung around to give me nightmares. 'Antibiotic-resistant bacteria' was one of the lurkers: I remember being six years old, staring at the ceiling at night and panicking over what to do when the hospitals erupt into the streets. *We're down to our last reserve antibiotic!*

A couple years later CNN did a segment on 'bacteriophages' and how, now that Communism had been vanquished, Russian researchers were looking for a way to profit from their knowledge of phage therapy. Progress was slow, because the Russians wanted to *profit*.

"Great!" I thought, "here's the answer to our problem!" Bacteriophages are like very specific antibiotics: they are viruses that attack just one type of bacteria. Phage therapy works by infecting a bacterial infection with the appropriate virus, and so has the potential to *at least* diminish our dependency on a shrinking pool of effective antibiotics.

Well, twenty years later and phage therapy still isn't used outside of Russia and Georgia. (Not to treat infections in humans, anyway.) It's not that all the problems with antibiotics have been solved; it's not that phage therapy is ineffective. Why wait till last minute to introduce a more sustainable way of treating bacterial infections?

I suspect the foot-dragging has to do with difficulties patenting the viruses or their delivery methods because, in fact, the 1990s were not the first time a Russian tried to spread bacteriophage know-how westward.

Way, way back, just after WWII, a Russian scientist in Paris, Mikhail Bulgakov's brother Nikolai Afanasievich, shared his knowledge of phage therapy with Americans interested in using the treatment back home. Nikolai Afanasievich had a library of live phages and knowledge of how to package them.

This was valuable information. In 1945, antibiotics were not yet widely available in the USA and it would be much longer before they were available elsewhere. Phage treatments are closer to a 'magic bullet' cure than antibiotics ever were.

Here's an account of the early history of phage therapy according to M. A. Bulgakov's second wife, Lyubov Belozerskaya-Bulgakova:

> *In real life I never had the opportunity to meet Nikolai Afanasievich Bulgakov. This younger representative of the Bulgakov family's favorite profession was a doctor of medicine, a bacteriologist, a scientist and researcher. He died in Paris in 1966.*
>
> *He studied at the University of Zagreb, and then worked there in the Department of Bacteriology. He and the Croat doctor, Sertich, collaborated on several scientific works which caught the attention of the Parisian scientist, Professor Felix d'Herelle, who discovered the bacteriophage in 1917. After organizing his own institute in Paris for the study and production of bacteriophages for medical use, d'Herelle invited the young scientists from Zagreb to join him.*
>
> *N. A. Bulgakov was involved not just in the bacteriophages themselves, but also in designing and inventing all sorts of scientific apparatus.*
>
> *In one of his books, Professor d'Herelle relates how he sent a streptococcus culture to Paris from London with instructions to find the bacteriophage which would destroy it. After only two weeks his desire had been accomplished. "To do that kind of work," wrote d'Herelle, "it had to be Bulgakov, with his abilities and precise methods."*
>
> *In 1939 d'Herelle sent Nikolai Afanasievich to Mexico in his place, to organize the teaching of bacteriology there. This task was accomplished, and Bulgakov organized a bacteriological laboratory. He was lecturing in Spanish within six months. During the German occupation of France Nikolai Afanasievich, being a Yugoslav citizen, he was sent to a camp near Compiegne as a hostage. He worked as a doctor there, and demonstrated what an unusually good man he was, dealing with every misfortune. This is what those who knew him well say.*
>
> *At the end of the war a special American commission,*

> *interested in transporting bacteriophages to the USA, arrived in Paris to inspect the laboratory. N. A. Bulgakov showed the Americans not only his extensive collection of live microbes, but also the functioning of the machine that filled and sealed the capsules of the bacteriophages under sterile conditions. The question of transport to the USA was solved satisfactorily…*

And there Lyubov stops with one of her annoying ellipses. She doesn't mention monetary compensation.

Perhaps phage therapy hasn't caught on because there's something more complex about working with viruses than molds, but I find it hard to believe the technical hurdles are so great that we couldn't have overcome them in the 70-odd years between 1945 and today. Maintaining an effective stable of antibiotics is still a problem, and phage therapy has continued to progress outside the US-patent-dependent Pharmasphere. Why on earth would the medical establishment wait until last minute to *at least introduce* a more sustainable way of treating infection? Russian profiteers are not the only obstacle!

I suggest that if the declining efficacy of antibiotics is an important enough problem to scare six-year-olds with, then we need to aggressively pursue alternative methods of treatment, even if it means Russians make some money.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE KENNEL CLUB

The *Master and Margarita* is not a romance; it's not about 'perfect love' conquering persecution. It's about a spoiled woman and her idolization of a weak man, and how that idolization leads to both heroism and cowardice.

A week ago I promised to look at the character of Margarita, and how she relates to Pilate's loyal dog, Banga. I'm probably the first person to do this *ever*, because who in their right mind would compare a beautiful and liberated woman to an unquestioning canine? I'll one-up that: Banga is the better of the two. Banga loves Pilate because of how the procurator treats the dog; Margarita only loves the image of the Master which she created in her mind.

This distinction matters for reasons that will resonate with anyone who's reflected on what it means to be a fashionable woman circa 2013. Margarita loves the way the Master makes her look, she loves the aura of 'mastery', and the power that brings with it. (Shades of grey and Nigella Lawson.) Margarita is drawn to Azazello and Woland for the same reason.

How did Bulgakov describe Margarita? A beautiful, yet aging, woman with all the material comforts which Bulgakov felt an acute lack of: comfortable housing, good food, domestic help. Things that you don't get unless you're politically connected in 1920s/30s Moscow. Her husband is a kind, respected doctor but he's impotent. Margarita is bored and bitchy. She imagines herself the perfect lover out of a reclusive author who she bumps into on the street one day. We never learn his real name (it doesn't matter), but Margarita christens him "The Master" and sews him a ridiculous beanie-cap with an "M" to prove it.

Margarita plays house with her creation. She idolizes the book he works on– to the point where 'the Master' feels jealous of her relation to it. She pushes him towards publishing the book against his better judgement. Yet, despite her manic devotion to the Master, she doesn't leave her husband. What is she waiting for? For the public to recognize her Master's greatness like she does? So that she can have both the excitement of the author *and* the material comforts she's used to with the doctor?

Of course, when ill-intentioned publishers leak sections of the book to the press, Margarita is shocked and horrified at the reaction of the critics. The Master is less surprised, but isn't strong enough to admit he resents Margarita for her pushiness. Margarita responds to the critics with untempered vindictiveness: she makes a pact with the devil and smashes up one of their apartments. (She lashes out without thought to how she hurts herself in the process.)

Margarita is an arch-type: a type of woman I'd wager that Bulgakov got used to seeing at the parties thrown by the Party. Either well connected or naturally blessed, they enjoyed the fruits of the new political order without having to understand the ugly machinations that went on under it all. They are the ladies in head-dresses at Spaso House—actually, Margarita is queen of them all.

Their lack of understanding is important because it's the flip-side to the central theme of the novel. A "meeting of minds" requires two minds to be present, and even the best author can't communicate if readers ignore their responsibility to reflect on the world around them (or themselves).

Margarita is not reflective in the least, she swallows fashionable

ideas whole and her political conformity is exemplified in her nick-name for the author: Master. Alfred Barkov made an interesting point about the title 'Master' during the 20s/30s:

> *In Russia, for the last few centuries the notion of master has been the central point of controversy. The adherents of the poetical approach insist that the creative literary process requires the ability to feel and comprehend lyrics while the advocates of the mastery concept assert that everybody can be trained to become a poet – much in the same way the shoe-makers are trained.*
>
> *After the 1917 October revolt, the Soviet establishment launched a campaign aimed at irradication the 'obsolete bourgeois culture' and replacing it with the 'proletarian' one. That stage of the horrible process was depicted by Bulgakov in his novella The Heart of a Dog(2).*
>
> *To replace the exterminated class of the intelligentsia (3), the poorly educated 'proletarians' with the dog's hearts were hastily trained to become poets, writers and dramatists. These Masters comprised the new literary establishment defined in The Master and Margarita as the MASSOLIT. In the book Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita: the true content, I argue that Bulgakov meant that satirical abbreviation to stand for The MASters of the SOviet LITerature.*
>
> *The scholars engaged in the Bulgakov studies still disregard the fact that the Mastery concept was consistently interjected by the Communist state, and that the process was controlled personally by Stalin. Its ideological base was elaborated by the then Minister of Culture A.V. Lunacharsky. It was Lunacharsky who forced the Mastery policy into application as an integral part of the Communist party 'anti-bourgeoisie' ideological strategy. In The Master and Margarita, Bulgakov depicted that odious person as Sempleyarov, the Director of Theatres and Shows, and as critic Latunsky.*

So 'master' has political overtones, like those 'change agent' carries in the contemporary USA. The author of Pilate's biography is as far from being a 'Master' as Pat Buchanan is from being a Weatherman, but that doesn't impede the sheltered socialite Margarita.

Margarita's character is rooted in something deeper than revolutionary politics: blood tells. The Devil, Woland, frequently chuckles and says "blood tells" in response to Margarita's uncanny ability to curry favor with him and her exemplary skills as a courtier. Bulgakov's writing is sprinkled with historical references and I have a hunch that "blood tells" is in reference to Catherine de' Medici.

> *"[Koroviev] A hint: one of the French queens who lived in the sixteenth century would, one must suppose, be very amazed if someone told her that after all these years I would be leading her lovely great-great-great-granddaughter on my arm through the ballrooms of Moscow."*

Bulgakov sees something unchanging in the type of woman who, throughout the centuries, abases herself through power-worship: as though this character defect is an evolutionary strategy imprinted somewhere in their XX genetic code. There are plenty of men who worship power too, but the qualities of a good 'courtier' are feminine qualities.

Margarita's power-worship reaches comic proportions. Woland has a massive gold pendant hung around her neck, *a la* Flavor Flav. The pendant carries a picture of a large black poodle and it's weight pulls Margarita downward; I think that the analogy is obvious. Barkov wrote that in early versions of *M&M*, Margarita degraded herself even further at the Spring Ball of the Full Moon– ugly acts to expedite getting what she wants. After she performs her services her conscience is clear; concepts like honor do not weigh heavily on her.

Margarita doesn't will evil, but she enables it through selfishness and thoughtlessness. Her shallowness is not just a lifestyle choice, it's actually extremely anti-social. The devil has to find a Margarita every time he wants to throw a party.

So is she a write-off? No. Margarita's capable of mercy (think Frieda) and she shows love to the Master, even if it's just a reflection of herself that she's in love with. She helps the Master be more than he might otherwise have been– his novel was completed and read– though I'm not sure she'd have risked helping the Master if she really understood what she was getting into. In a sense, she's the perfect companion for a man riddled by the most terrible of vices; her recklessness paired with his cowardice.

Whatever the motivation for her love, Margarita *is* faithful– a quality which brings me to Banga. Margo is faithful for reasons beginning and ending with her own desires, Banga because nature made him that way. Neither the dog nor the woman know much about the world of the men they love.

Here's an excerpt where the Devil explains the Master's fate:

> *Your novel has been read,' Woland began, turning to the master, 'and the only thing said about it was that, unfortunately, it is not finished. So, then, I wanted to show you your hero. For about two thousand years he has been sitting on this platform and sleeping, but when the full moon comes, as you see, he is tormented by insomnia. It torments not only him, but also his faithful guardian, the dog.If it is true that cowardice is the most grievous vice, then the dog at least is not guilty of it. Storms were the only thing the brave dog feared. Well, he who loves must share the lot of the one he loves.'*
>
> *`What is he saying?' asked Margarita, and her perfectly calm*

> *face clouded over with compassion.*
>
> *'He says one and the same thing,' Woland replied. `He says that even the moon gives him no peace, and that his is a bad job. That is what he always says when he is not asleep, and when he sleeps, he dreams one and the same thing: there is a path of moonlight, and he wants to walk down it and talk with the prisoner Ha-Nozri, because, as he insists, he never finished what he was saying that time, long ago, on the fourteenth day of the spring month of Nisan. But, alas, for some reason he never manages to get on to this path, and no one comes to him.'*

Banga and Margo love their charges as much as they each are able; they most perfectly express their love through loyalty. The bittersweet consequence is that both dog and woman share their lovers' fate, even though neither the dog nor the woman are cowards. (Although, judgement should be tempered by the fact that neither the dog nor the woman have as much understanding of the world around them as Pilate or the Master.)

I feel compelled to address the question: was Bulgakov a misogynist? I can think of at least one critic who hints at an affirmative answer (guess who). I don't think he was, he just didn't feel the need to cater to feminist sensibilities– which is not the same as undervaluing women.

Bulgakov was not a pessimist, either. He prefaced M&M with a quote from Goethe's Faust: "I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good." This applies to the Margaritas of the world as much as to Woland. Even her pact with the devil 'works good' because the Master's novel is read and completed. In fact, Bulgakov believes (or at least *wills*) that happy endings are predetermined, as Woland tells Margarita: "Everything will turn out right, the world is built on that." A depressing thing for the devil to admit.

LEAVE A COMMENT

LEAVE A COMMENT

CLOSING MINDS

There are a handful of blogs that I read every day, and yesterday I came across this short post on Karl Wenclas' blog:

> *Today's establishment intellectuals receive feedback on two levels.*
>
> *A.) That which you actually say. The argument you make.*
>
> *B.) More important, to how they react, is whether you agree or disagree with them. As simple as that.*
>
> *Whether or not they pay attention to A, depends on B.*

This struck a chord with me, because it echoes my personal experience from working in academia and think-tanks/lobbies. The goal is not quality research, the goal is consensus. The desire for consensus is so deeply ingrained in professional 'experts', that some confuse consensus with real research or even truth. It's a frightening example of cognitive dissonance– especially from people who are paid to be thoughtful.

To illustrate my point, here's an anecdote from my time working as a junior analyst at a think-tank. ('Think-tanks' in the US are organizations that are supposed to provide non-partisan information on particular subjects, like healthcare, education or public policy.)

My think-tank had an established tradition of inviting analysts from the CIA to work there for a few years, then go back to the agency. The arrangement is designed to enrich research at both organizations, there was nothing 'secret' about it. At any given time, we junior analysts would work under/along with a handful of guest CIA analysts.

One of the perks of working with these analysts was that occasionally they would organize lunches with themed discussions. One such lunch was organized by a very genteel and soft-spoken analyst: a middle-aged lady who'd been with the CIA for most of her career. The subject of her talk was what we junior analysts could expect if we signed up for a career at the CIA.

She tried to give a balanced view of what the job was like and what qualifications were necessary. The lady had been recruited out of a humanities PhD program, having spent a year in her the region of expertise studying at a US-aligned college campus. Prior to that she hadn't traveled out of the USA– outside of brief family vacations. Her parents had been civil servants and she grew up in a comfortable East-coast suburban community.

She told us that the typical CIA analyst was lucky if they could spend two weeks out of the year in their region of expertise. The rest of their time would be at a desk, in front of a computer, working through their daily stack of intelligence.

Their daily stack of intelligence. You see, CIA analysts don't just trawl around picking up random bits of information. There are 'approved' information sources that analysts *have* to work from, and every day *somebody else* trawls through these sources looking for information that it's okay for the analysts to see. The packet of predigested info is then sent to the analyst for summary. That's how things like The President's Daily Brief are put together, at least according to this veteran analyst and her colleagues.

Recap: CIA analysts are basically secretaries, who write memos on research that *somebody else* does. Unlike secretaries, CIA analysts bear the burden of responsibility when the info turns out to be biased or incorrect. They are sort of like an army of punching-bags. Or straw-men.

I asked the analyst who chooses which information she can use and what their title is, and sadly, I've forgotten the name of the position. But, it was something like 'controller'. She thought my question was strange and off-topic. I got the impression that she didn't know much about her 'controller'.

It may be surprising to civilians that this is the way CIA analysis is done. I would say that this is probably how analysis for *public* consumption is done. But the CIA's army of researchers are in good company. I would wager that most American 'research' organizations work this way, my think-tank certainly did.

During our orientation as junior analysts we were given a list of acceptable sources to use– the list contained about 20 journal and newspaper titles, which were in turn subdivided into 'left' and 'right' leaning sources, such as *The Washington Post* or stuff published by The Heritage Foundation or AEI. (We were non-partisan, remember!) There was also a short third column for publications that were totally beyond the pale, such as *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*.

I would say that about half of the analysts I worked with didn't see a problem with this way of doing business. The other half were smart enough, and cynical enough, to just "talk the talk" and network. I believe this situation is typical *at least* across think-tanks.

The resulting intellectual climate in 'prestigious' organizations is very incestuous. And boring. And dangerous for the rest of the country.

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